



The reception counter at the wetlands park is in shambles.

Wetlands park calls for help to lift it out of sorry state

Companies urged to sponsor conservation and community outreach programmes to improve situation



The woodwork at the chalets at Paya Indah Wetland Park are infested with termites.

Story and photos by GRACE CHEN
gracechen@thestar.com.my

COMPANIES that want to stamp their brand in the areas of tourism, conservation awareness and community outreach can look into partnership strategies with the Paya Indah Wetlands Park in Dengkil.

Its superintendant Petra Sulai said they were not looking for cash gifts, but for firms to carry out conservation and awareness programmes with them to benefit both parties.

In the past, he said companies like Aeon and Telekom did tree-planting and mascot representation programmes.

Petra said the 3,100ha wetlands, which comes under the purview of the Wildlife and National Parks Department, was formerly a used tin mine.

Rehabilitation work to transform the scarred mining land into a wetland began in 1998, where the mining ponds were converted into lakes that are home to fish, lotus plants and water lilies.

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who officially opened it in 2001, spoke of its enormous tourism potential.

"Back then, Dr Mahathir kept 15 horses here as he was an avid rider," recalled Petra.

The park's attractions include free entrance, recreational fishing (fees apply), bird watching and live feeding sessions of the park's three resident hippopotamuses, 57 crocodiles and tortoises.

"There is no entrance fee but we have a donation box ready during



Petra says the park has applied for funding to carry out the necessary repairs.

the live feeding sessions," hinted Petra.

Of its menagerie, not many visitors are aware of efforts to keep them hale and hearty.

The hippopotamuses were a gift from the Botswana government in 2001.

The park's deputy superintendant Kosmas John said besides ensuring they were fed their daily fill of 120kg of napier grass, oats, fruits and vegetables, its keepers were also faced with a complicated love triangle.

Rivalry for the affection of the only male in the hippo pond has forced the keepers to devise a rotation system so that each female gets her turn with him.

The effort has paid off as one of



The hippopotamuses at the park were gifts from the Botswana government in 2001.



The back entrance of the empty shoplots at the commercial complex.

the female hippos is suspected to be pregnant. If this is proven true, the future offspring will mark the third generation to be born and bred in captivity in the park.

The park's float of crocodiles remains its most fearsome attraction.

"Many of these crocodiles were sent to us after their capture in Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang," said Kosmas.

Their tortoises, many of which are of the radiated slider (*astrochelys radiata*) species, came from Madagascar.

"People buy them as pets because they look cute when they are little. But once they start growing and the owners can't care for them, they bring it to us," said Kosmas.

On funding to keep the park running, Petra said all proceeds from the rental of its meeting room, open-air cafe and existing facilities including donations collected are channelled back to the Water, Land and Natural Resources Ministry.

In response to visitors' complaints on the poor upkeep of some of its facilities, Petra said the park had applied for funding to carry out the necessary repairs but there was no definite date on when this would be done.

On the issue of its termite-infested accommodation chalets, Petra said out of 31 units, only 15 were open for bookings.

He said discussions were under way to privatise this section between a company and the state government.

"The park's operations team wants a jetty built at the crocodile pond so the keepers can feed the reptiles far away from visitors.

"This is for crowd control because there is the danger of visitors getting attacked if they lean too far out to feed the reptiles," said Kosmas.

To minimise risks, multiple warnings are given to visitors during feeding times by park staff.

However, Petra said the allure of the park did not lie solely on the animal attractions but the diverse flora and fauna, which has provided an ecological paradise for birds. There are about 200 species here.

"The park is very popular with bird watchers. They come early in the morning and spend hours looking into the trees."

National Hydraulic Research Institute (Nahrim), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) are some of the organisations that come here to carry out research.



The crocodiles at the park are those captured from other locations in the country.



A radiated slider finds itself the centre of attention during feeding session at the Paya Indah Wetlands Park.